

Case 16

The Use of Learning Journals in Assessment

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16.1 Context

This case study will focus on the use of learning journals as an assessment tool in an undergraduate module entitled *Creativity, Culture and Imagination*, module code VM103. This module is part of the 1st year programme of the Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Finance and Venture Management¹. The course is housed in the Economics Department of National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth.

There were 29 students in the class group. The module was taught by four different people each of whom was responsible for different elements associated with VM103. This case-study refers to the assessment used for one element of the module, VM103-Part 2, which involved 12 teacher-student contact hours. The methodologies employed within this element of the module were student-centred and active learning focused. The module is part of a programme that is managed by a course director/professor who actively encourages innovative, engaging and effective approaches to the learning experience and environment; this approach affords the flexibility necessary for innovation in assessment.

¹<http://www.nuim.ie/academic/economics/courses.html>

16.2 Learning Outcomes being Assessed

Two forms of assessment were used to evaluate learning in VM103-Part 2, namely, the learning/creative journal and a group presentation of a project plan. This case-study focuses solely on the journal element. The key learning outcome associated with the journal element of the course was that students would have:

... engaged in their own creative thinking and acts.

Evidence of this engagement would be provided through the keeping of the journal in which students would record, develop, enhance and reflect on their creative and critical thinking.

Another learning outcome for the module was that:

... students would have contributed to the assessment methods used.

16.3 Assessment Procedures/Details

The teacher decided the basic content for the journal in advance. The journals could contain three elements: two compulsory, namely, 'Creative Tasks' and 'Assignments and Coursework'; and one optional entitled 'etc.'. Students were provided with guidance regarding what they might record under each heading and with guidelines regarding writing a journal. The guidelines were adapted and annotated from Jenny Moon's book, *Learning journals: a handbook for academics, students and professional development* (Moon, 1999a). For this element of the module, the journal represented 60% of the overall mark.

Other processes associated with the journal were discussed and negotiated with the students. The most important element of this negotiation was the student/teacher discussion regarding the criteria for assessing the journals; these were devised, debated, negotiated, redrafted and ultimately agreed by the students and teacher as follows:

The journal would demonstrate quality in terms of:

- fulfilment of the purpose of the journal;
- number, regularity and length of entries;
- presentation and legibility;
- clarity of observation and evidence of speculation and reflection;
- evidence of creative and critical thinking;
- a deep approach to the journal;
- ability to place the journal both within and outside of the course; and
- the journal as a creative piece (the group and the teacher also discussed and agreed on what constitutes a 'creative piece').

The teacher judged the students' journals on how well they fulfilled these criteria. Although the students submitted their journals at the end of the module, they were expected to make journal entries on a weekly basis.

16.4 Strengths and Limitations

Following the module, the students were asked to identify the strengths/limitations of the journal as an assessment tool. The following sections are based entirely on the students' written feedback and include quotations from that feedback.

16.4.1 Strengths

The students found the continuous nature of the assessment to be more 'manageable' than an end of module assessment. They described keeping the journal as 'enjoyable' and indicated that the journal gave them more options, variety and 'freedom' than conventional assessment. Other comments from the students regarding the strengths of the journal are listed below:

I think that as an assessment tool it gives the marker a better insight not only as to how the class went but also to get to know the student more personally than you would through the classroom arena.

It is effective because you tend to take pride in your personal chosen topics ... Therefore you tend to spend a good bit of time on getting it right and in turn learn more about your chosen subject.

The creative journals allowed each individual student to showcase their own personal abilities, talents, and interests. I think this was very important because not everyone can simply compress their skills into an essay, or report. The creative journal offered complete freedom to display them in various ways.

16.4.2 Limitations

Some students noted that the fact that the journal was written and the fact that guidelines were offered regarding completing the journal was a limitation. They also noted that the 'solitary' nature of the journal could be limiting and, perhaps, there should have been greater scope for team/group entries. In some instances, the flexibility offered by the journal was seen by students as a possible limitation—one student noted that:

Some people need strict guidelines as to what is expected of them with regards to anything they are graded on and the broad spectrum that the creative journal had, concerning the content of each students journal, can make feel some students feeling dumbfounded as to what to do and therefore not produce something to the best of their abilities.

The difficulty associated with grading the journals was also mentioned:

It is very hard to grade a creative journal as there is technically no correct answer.

16.5 Contributor's Reflections on the Assessment

16.5.1 Initial concerns regarding using journals for assessment

One of the key concerns about using journals in this context was the issue of how fair and reliable they might be as an assessment tool. In order to address this issue, the use of the journal for assessment and the criteria against which it was assessed were discussed and negotiated with students. For the teacher, another potential concern was the private and personal nature of the journals and the disclosure involved in submitting them for assessment; interestingly, the students noted no such concern and, indeed, in their comments noted that they would have liked the opportunity to share some elements of the journal with their classmates. As one of the students noted:

I think that if people were comfortable with perhaps doing a presentation on their (journal) or passing it around the class, it would give their classmates a better understanding of who they are and perhaps see them in a new light.

16.5.2 General comments on the process

Based on the feedback received from the students, it appears that the process was effective, enjoyable and closely aligned with demonstrating the achievement of the module's learning outcomes. On the basis of this experience, the journal might well be equally effectively employed in other contexts, provided that a similar alignment to learning outcomes existed and that the purpose of the journal was clearly outlined at the outset. Negotiation with the students about using journals and, especially, regarding the criteria against which it would be assessed is integral to the success of the process.

16.5.3 Application to larger groups

The journals are low on resource implications; however they are time-consuming to mark. With a group of 29, the marking process is manageable, but with a group of say 100 it would be an onerous task. One way of coping with higher numbers might be to ask the students to submit a full journal and request that they identify only 2 to 3 entries, which would be marked.

16.5.4 Pleasant surprises

The level of creativity displayed in the journals, in terms of both content and presentation, was really impressive. The journals that were submitted were of all shapes and sizes—many were submitted as scrap books and conventional journals, but some were delivered in decorated boxes, on CD and one was in a bottle! Many of the journals included images, photographs, newspaper cuttings and a range of colours and textures. All of the journals displayed evidence of effort and creativity and the assessment process was very rewarding for both the teacher and the students.

16.5.5 Planning for future use of journals

Students were asked for their opinion regarding how the use of journals as an assessment tool might be improved; some saw no need for changes or improvement, others noted that although the assessment was continuous, the single end of module deadline could be improved with the identification of task specific deadlines. A few students noted that they would like to have presented entries from their journal to the class group and that there should be no restriction regarding presentation method, i.e., the journal should not *have* to be written.

Having received such positive feedback from students and being satisfied personally that the journals achieved the purpose for which they were designed, I will have no hesitation in using them again with the next group who will take VM103- Part 2. My approach will be very similar, but I will stress that not all entries need to incorporate a written element. I will also discuss with students the question of whether they might like to show the journal, or some of the entries, to each other.

16.5.6 Final words

Two comments from students to finish:

I was very proud of my final journal, truly I don't really know if it was good or not, but I put the work into it and felt a sense of achievement when it was complete, compared to other assignments, which are only a laborious necessity to get the marks.

What is so effective about the creative journal in my view is the ownership the students has over it. It was probably the best project last year for expressing our individuality. The journal actually did what most projects seek but fail to do and that is to apply classroom knowledge to life.

16.6 Bibliography

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